

The Editorial Notebook**Even Hardball Has Rules**

American views about espionage have changed considerably since that age of innocence when a code-breaking unit was shut down in 1929 by Secretary of State Stimson because "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail." In the age of cold war, most people acknowledge the need to play hardball. Small countries may have the luxury of virtue; great powers are locked in a clandestine combat in which no mercy is expected.

But what if the great power is a democracy and what if it plays hardball by giving an execution list of Soviet agents to a hostile tyranny like Iran?

That's what the C.I.A. is supposed to have done, according to unnamed officials in a Washington Post account. The agency reportedly provided Ayatollah Khomeini in 1982 with a list of as many as 200 names of Soviet agents, most of whom were swiftly executed. If it happened, the ostensible purpose was to curry favor with Iran and to cripple K.G.B. operations in a vital country. For the sake of the C.I.A. and America's honor, one hopes this terrible transaction never took place.

*Iran's Police
Need No Help From
The C.I.A.*

All dossiers are fallible. In Vietnam, Americans found to their dismay that Operation Phoenix, a secret program of "neutralizing" spies, claimed innumerable innocents. As one officer recalled: "I found examples in my own nets of Vietnamese reporting people to whom they owed money or longstanding family fights or had personal arguments." It's hard to believe that American agents have any surer knowledge of Iran, or are better placed to evaluate what a Soviet defector might say.

In Iran, mere suspicion can be fatal, with "proof" extracted under torture. If the C.I.A. gratuitously furnished a list of spies to Khomeini's brutal police, the K.G.B. could well compete in this deadly game by purporting to unmask Western agents. At the crudest level, this blood trade wins no favor since Iran knows that

the C.I.A. is also covertly helping exiled Iranians. In the end, that kind of hardball only confirms Teheran's belief in the Great Satan's perfidy.

Bitter experience has persuaded Americans that espionage needs rules and limits. The Church Committee exposed botched attempts to kill foreign leaders like Fidel Castro and to destabilize unfriendly regimes. Then came disturbing revelations about past recruitment of Nazi war criminals like Klaus Barbie as anti-Communist intelligence "assets." Bit by bit, another dreadful story has been emerging: The cynical Western betrayal in 1945 of perhaps a million Russian exiles and war prisoners, indiscriminately returned to certain death in the Soviet Union.

There's no colder phrase in diplomacy than "raison-d'état," the justification that enables decent people to do the indecent for flag and country. But only extreme circumstance can excuse a democracy's secret connivance with evil to combat evil. Turning over names of alleged traitors to Iran is the kind of hardball that Americans ought not play, and cannot win.

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